DAWN

OPINION

Hollow victory

THE PML-N's clean sweep in Sunday's by-elections in Punjab, along with its symbolically significant victory in Haripur, is hardly a popular endorsement of its development narrative. With its main rival, the PTI, largely absent from the lacklustre contest, its victory, at least in Punjab, which it has dominated for the better part of the last four decades, was a foregone conclusion. What was surprising, however, is that the party still felt compelled to deploy the state machinery to allegedly manipulate results for inflating its votes in many constituencies. The PML-N's victory is real; but the method allegedly employed to construct a narrative of reclaimed popularity makes it questionable, even if it does not totally discredit this success. A victory that requires the absence of a credible opponent from the contest and a suspect voting process is without substance.

On its part, the PTI has done itself or democracy no service by staying away from the process. With the viewpoint that certain quarters would not in any case let it win the polls prevailing in its rank and file, its decision was apparently influenced by the persecution of the party and its leadership and the way it was denied its mandate in the February 2024 elections. Nonetheless, the boycott of the by-election meant serving the national and provincial seats it had won then on a platter to its rival. More importantly, the PTI missed a huge opportunity to mobilise its popular support by conducting a rigorous campaign for its candidates. Any crackdown on its support base would have further exposed its opponents. Late PPP leader Benazir Bhutto had for years regretted the decision to give an open field to pro-Zia forces by boycotting the 1985 party-less elections. The PTI may also regret its decision unless it is still banking on a break-up between the ruling PML-N and the powers that be.

While its 'overwhelming' victory has delivered the PML-N a simple majority in the National Assembly and freed it from its dependence on its coalition partners for legislative changes, the by-polls have killed whatever little hope the PPP had of regaining some ground it has lost in Punjab over the past decade and a half. The only provincial seat from which it has returned its candidate is the one that was doled out in Muzaffargarh by the PML-N. That its coalition partner refused to accommodate the PPP in D.G. Khan underscores that it wants not just the PTI out of its way in Punjab but also its coalition partner which will continue to exist on the margins in the province in the foreseeable future. In short, it is not just that major political parties have lost something on the weekend; democracy too has emerged as a loser in the process.

Web of darkness

VIOLENCE against women is an admission of the inability of mostly male perpetrators to forge balanced, respectful associations with females. The 2025 International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women marks the launch of the 'UNITE to End Digital Violence against Women and Girls' campaign. The drive extends over 16 days and concludes on International Human Rights Day. Tech-facilitated gender-based violence is a predominant feature of our online environment — 3,171 complaints were registered across the country last year. According to the Digital Rights Foundation, the highest count of 386 reports were logged in May. Cyber harassment topped the list with 2,741 complaints. Shockingly, 36pc emerged from areas where FIA cybercrime wings are operational. The categorisation of cases by gender, unsurprisingly, revealed that a total of 1,772 were reported by women, and 1,365 by men. The data also suggests a disproportionate victimisation of women through non-consensual intimate images and image-based abuse to bully, blackmail and cause "reputational damage". Moreover, the foundation's findings say 90pc of harassment complaints with the agency are from women. Global figures too reveal that gendered abuse persists unhindered. In 2024, the Economist Intelligence Unit stated that internationally, 85pc women experienced online harassment in various forms.

Year after year, lofty declarations seem to save fewer women. Online or offline, abuse extracts a life toll. It hampers women's access to education, employment, and even political participation: all too often working women face online cruelty, while many female public office holders have contemplated quitting politics. These statistics mean permanently altered stories. Safeguards that ensure sanitised digital spaces for women are vital. We must introduce clarity and precision in legislations and their enforcement, inculcate digital literacy to battle the multiple aspects of TFGBV, and actively reduce the digital gender gap. Gender-sensitised LEAs, enhanced data protection laws for online security, with widespread knowledge of digital rights can bridge the gulf between pro-women laws and women's lived experiences. Governments cannot reserve preventive responses for the privileged alone. It results in the scarcity of community-driven awareness initiatives as well as abysmal GBV conviction rates, as evident in the Sustainable Social Development Organisation's *Mapping Gender-Based Violence 2024* report. Justice, online and offline, means consent is sacrosanct.

Crypto red flags

A LOT of money could be moving around unchecked. According to Chainalysis's *2025 Global Adoption Index*, Pakistan ranks third globally in crypto adoption, with most activity driven by small investors. Likewise, a 2020-21 report by the FPCCI estimated that Pakistanis collectively held around $20bn in cryptocurrencies. Research indicates that outside of Binance, a popular crypto exchange platform, much of the trading in cryptocurrencies occurs on local peer-to-peer platforms. These platforms enable direct transactions without Know-Your-Customer checks, allowing significant sums to move across borders with no oversight. The situation should trigger concern. The chairman of the Exchange Companies Association of Pakistan recently warned that people are buying dollars from foreign exchange companies and using them to purchase crypto. This, he believes, has resulted in roughly $600m 'disappearing' from the formal system. If true, it could get Pakistan into trouble with the FATF yet again. Crypto can create openings for money laundering and terror financing, drawing unwanted attention from the FATF, whose requirements for regulating crypto include collecting and sharing originator and beneficiary information and ensuring that service providers are properly licensed and supervised. On the regulatory side, Pakistan is still in the early stages of building this framework. The Pakistan Crypto Council, formed earlier this year, has yet to issue comprehensive guidelines.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Virtual Asset Regulatory Authority has begun the process of licensing service providers but is still only inviting expressions of interest from global exchanges. Given the scale of grassroots crypto activity and the ease with which unlicensed platforms operate, the potential for illicit financial flows is substantial, underscoring the need for a robust regulatory framework. The Ecap chairman's warning should prompt the authorities to complete their homework before global watchdogs start prying into the country's financial system again.

BY ARIFA NOOR

Short joyride

Foreign policy miracles and numerous trips abroad still haven't yielded the awaited manna.

BACK in January, if a tarot card reader had predicted that it was going to be a fabulous year for the Pakistani government, she (or he) would not have been denied payment. But boy, would she have turned out to be right! May onwards, it seems as if the government — and others in the vicinity — can do no wrong.

Islamabad (and Pindi) seemed to have been gifted with the Midas touch. Pushed into a conflict with India, it came out on top with an air combat that is being discussed around the world. The number of planes that Pakistan shot down is a topic no one can get enough of. But this wasn't all. Even the communications battle was won hands down. And since then, there has been no looking back.

This was followed with a romance with the US that no one had predicted. There was a one-on-one lunch at the White House and then a few months later a meeting at the Oval Office where both the field marshal and the prime minister were present. And before, during and after these meetings, the US president can't stop praising the country and its military leadership. Some put it down to the decision to nominate Donald Trump for the Nobel or give him credit for the cessation of hostilities in South Asia or lobbying. Regardless, it now appears to be a match made in heaven.

Along with this came warmer relations with the Middle East and respect that perhaps had been missing in the past few years. Pakistan now has a seat at the table in the Middle East, whether on discussions on Gaza or in relations with Iran — and also thanks to the Saudi-Pak defence pact, which has ears wagging everywhere.

If this weren't enough, the government has been managing the IMF programme well enough so that no one fears any delays or any calls to 'do more' from the Fund. The missions visit Pakistan and leave without any major hiccups in terms of expectations or conditionalities, compared to the mess back in 2022.

And now there are no local challenges either. Legislation has taken care of all else. In the rest of the world, they may have forcible conversions but in Islamabad, we have forcible consensus, which allowed for the 26th and 27th Amendments to the Constitution. 'Pesky' judges have been reined in and the entire judiciary defanged with the government in charge. If this weren't enough, immunity was granted to the president and field marshal. The opposition is now in jail or disqualified. If someone still wants to be a troublemaker, Peca is there to the rescue. Even reporting or commenting on cricket can get one in trouble. Journalists have taken note.

Is there anything left for Santa Claus to bring for the inhabitants of Constitution Avenue and Pindi?

But for those gossiping in the drawing rooms in Islamabad, there is one question left unanswered. The great foreign policy miracle and the innumerable trips abroad still have not yielded the manna from the skies that is anxiously being awaited. For the well-heeled, foreign policy success is not entirely a success if it doesn't bring foreign rents for the state and good times for the former. This also allows them to let the vulnerable breathe.

So be it a lunch at the White House, or the defence pact with Saudi Arabia, or rumours about troops for Gaza, the relevant press release is scanned minutely for mention of aid, assistance or any such word that holds out the promise that the dollars-are-a-comin'. But so far, the press releases have let us all down.

As a result, ministers wax lyrical about foreign policy successes and point at the plane flying over, carrying the PM or the FM or the DPM to the next trip but the ordinary citizens get easily distracted by the grocery bill or the latest message from FBR. The more generous and patriotic among the citizenry may even have felt happy that government officials could burn jet fuel for Pakistan's success and worldwide fame, although the former could barely pay the monthly petrol bill. The rulers can make pit stops in London while the ruled cannot even fly from Karachi to Lahore. But it's all about loving your country. For another, who woke up to the news of another attack in the nearby town, the debate over whether Pakistan shot down five planes or six by an American publication may also not bring much joy.

The government ignores this just as some of us ignore the pressure of the ever-increasing waistline on the hapless button. Easy to do especially as the press/ media has also been reined in through hook and by crook and compelled to avoid the real stories out there. Be it the crisis in the agricultural sector, or the export and import of sugar or the whispers about corruption matters, few in the journalistic community are going to run with this.

But a government of boomer uncles trying to adopt a Gen Z philosophy of 'delulu is the solulu' will eventually end up like Joe Biden. By the time it will fall apart, no one will be interested in their side of the story, while dumping all the blame on them. More importantly, like Biden, they also have a narrow window to take decisions. After that, it will be too late.

And by this, I don't mean they need to retire in time. But that if they don't manage to improve the life quality of those paying the taxes and struggling with no purchasing power or get a handle on militancy, the photo ops abroad and foreign policy successes will be hard to wax lyrical about. Without improving the economy and addressing militancy, the successes in the air, the constitutional amendments and by-election wins will soon outlive their efficacy. The party is not going to last forever. ■

The writer is a journalist.

BY JAWED NAQVI

Decency knows no passport

IT was meant to be like any other day of mastery and daredevilry in Wing Commander Namansh Syal's life. His plan was to showcase the acclaimed calisthenics of Indian Air Force's largely homegrown if acrimoniously delayed light combat aircraft Tejas before a global audience at the Dubai Air Show last week. Fate had other plans. The Tejas fell silent as it dove to the ground during an aerobatic manoeuvre killing Syal in the horrific fireball it became.

Things go wrong when least expected. The Titanic comes to mind. Another example is of Yuri Gagarin, the hero of our world of science and wonder, the first man to go into outer space in 1959. The Soviet cosmonaut died eight years later when the MiG-15 he was flying with a co-pilot in a test flight crashed in bad weather. For the Tejas, it was the second crash in 20 months, but the pilot had bailed out safely then. The high-profile Apollo disasters showed the best technology can be flawed. All three astronauts perished in the 1967 fire in a pre-launch test of Apollo-1. The Apollo-13 accident on the other hand happened in outer space, but miraculously no lives were lost.

Syal's tragedy prodded a gentle side of the human spirit when deeply felt tributes started coming from across the border to the fallen Indian. One heartwarming letter published on Indian social media apparently from a Pakistani well-wisher is the kind of stuff that helps tone down the toxicity unleashed on both sides by the short and bitter military stand-off in May between the two countries.

"To the Indian Air Force, to the family now navigating an ocean of absence: I offer what words can never carry — condolence wrapped in understanding that only those who've worn wings can truly know. A pilot has not merely fallen. A guardian of impossible altitudes has been summoned home. Somewhere tonight, a uniform hangs unworn. Somewhere, a child asks when the father returns. Somewhere, the sky itself feels emptier." This letter from Pakistan was shared online by Sabrang India, an NGO that works for human rights and communal harmony in South Asia.

Among the grieving recipients would be Syal's wife Afshan, herself an IAF officer. The condolence message reflected a sense of empathy from across the borders. It slammed the loutishness that passes for patriotic fervour between the two countries.

The letter purportedly from a PAF veteran could not be completely ascertained for authenticity, but such sentiments are not unknown to exist in India and Pakistan and occasionally do carry the day on both sides.

> Syal's tragedy prodded a gentle side of the human spirit when deeply felt tributes started coming from across the border.

There is palpable moping in the Indian media about the likelihood of business loss from the second consecutive crash of Tejas in 20 months. This is the kind of stuff that makes the soul cringe. I had a similar experience working with a Western news agency when the Rwanda massacres were happening. The news of daily gory killings had become smaller than a single column weather insert. Then one day, the stringer in Kigali filed a story about how the massacres were negatively impacting Rwanda's coffee crop. The bells at the New York Stock Exchange went wild, and the news agency's stringer was publicly praised as a role model.

Britain's fabled Red Arrows flying heroes have been involved in several flight accidents, but did we ever hear of the Hawk T1 jet losing money in the bargain? Red Arrows lost Flt Lt Jon Egging in 2011. Egging's Hawk T1 jet crashed after a display at the Bournemouth Air Festival, leading to the determination that G-force impairment may have contributed to the crash. There is speculation that a similar roller-coaster-like impairment may have visited Syal, which comes with sharp acceleration against gravity. Cpl Bayliss died in 2018 when his plane crashed at RAF Valley shortly after take-off during a faux engine failure manoeuvre as the pilot Flt Lt David Stark ejected safely.

The Wire carried a troubling report on the problems India has faced in defence manufacturing and vending hardware to foreign buyers. "The Tejas crash inevitably revives memories of an earlier disastrous export venture: the sale of its seven Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters (ALHs) to Ecuador in 2008-2009 for $42.5 million, of which four crashed," wrote well-regarded defence analyst Rahul Bedi. "These crashes eventually led to the Ecuador Air Force (EAF) terminating its ALH contract with HAL in October 2015, in a major setback to what was then the first ever major export of an indigenous military platform."

If money is really a concern, then a great tribute to Syal's death could be a national call for total transparency in arms deals that Indian governments have become so brazenly infamous for.

Instead, Syal's death has set off a frantic search for someone to blame. The official inquiry hasn't begun, but the more nationalist TV discussants on Indian channels are blaming the US for allegedly selling Indian Air Force inferior engines used in Tejas.

At a human level, Syal's death and the heart-tugging tributes pouring in for him can be seen as a reminder that people-to-people ties deserve to be placed at the heart of promoting a nicer, friendlier future for both countries. Let that be the essence of what the letter said in its tribute to the Indian pilot. ■

The writer is Dawn*'s correspondent in Delhi.*
jawednaqvi@gmail.com

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777
(Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777